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JUNGLE AFLAME





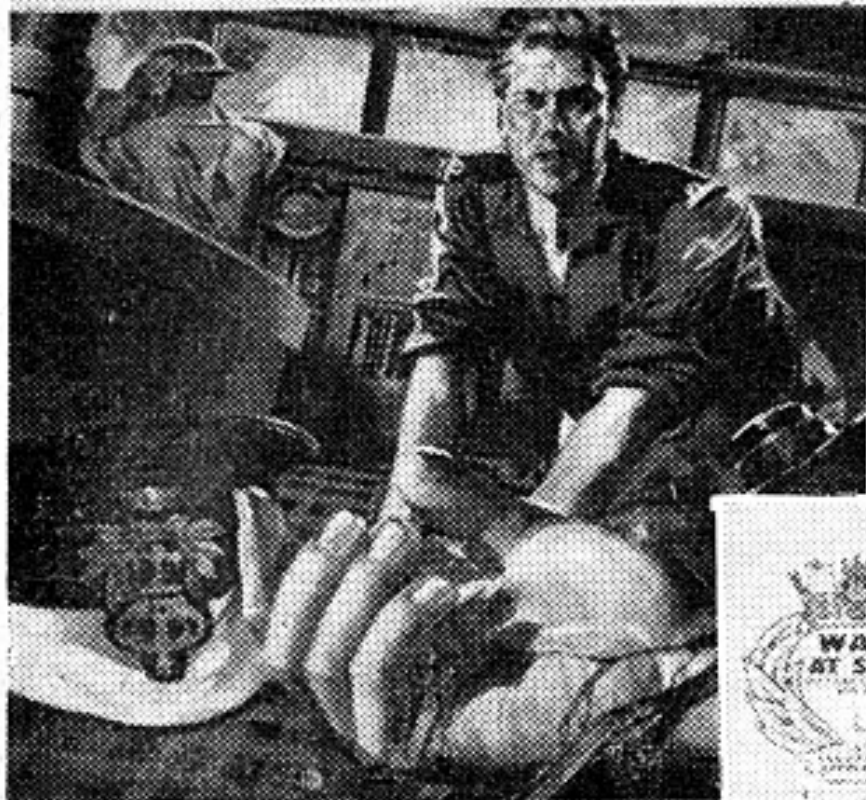
STORM CENTRE

No. 29 STORM CENTRE

A tangled web of treachery and murder enmeshed the tiny corvette as she fought for survival in the hostile, storm swept waters of the Pacific.

No. 30 THE SAVAGE DEEP

The success of every submarine attack hangs by a thin thread—the thread of life for those aboard, for there is no margin of error in the undersea war.



THE SAVAGE DEEP

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JUNGLE AFLAME

OF ALL THE MANY BRANCHES OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE, TRANSPORT COMMAND WAS PERHAPS THE LEAST PUBLICISED. BUT IT WAS NO LESS IMPORTANT THAN THE FIGHTING COMMANDS, AND AS THE WAR WENT ON, ITS TASKS GREW IN VARIETY AND BECAME EVER MORE NUMEROUS. NOWHERE WAS THIS MORE APPARENT THAN IN BURMA, WHERE THOUSANDS OF MEN ISOLATED IN THE DENSE JUNGLES WOULD HAVE DIED BUT FOR THE SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT DROPPED FROM THE SKIES.



Chapter 1. *Rough Trip*

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT DON RUTHERFORD WAS A TRANSPORT PILOT. THROUGH FAIR WEATHER AND FOUL, HE DELIVERED SUPPLIES TO THE OUTLYING PATROLS OF GENERAL WINGATE'S CHINDITS.

LOOKS LIKE ANOTHER
ROUGH TRIP, SKIPPER. CLOUD'S
DOWN TO GROUND LEVEL
AGAIN.

WE'LL BE LUCKY
TO GET A SIGHT OF THE
MOUNTAINS, TOM. SHOULD
BE CLEAR ON THE OTHER
SIDE, THOUGH.

SLOWLY THE DAKOTA STRUGGLED UP THROUGH THE CLOGGING ICE LAYER, STRAINING FOR THE EXTRA FEW HUNDRED FEET OF ALTITUDE WHICH WOULD TAKE IT OVER THE UNSEEN PEAKS OF THE MOUNTAIN RANGE DIVIDING INDIA FROM BURMA.



MINUTES GREW INTO HOURS AS THE HEAVILY LADEN TRANSPORT PLANE LABOURED ON THROUGH A LEADEN WORLD OF SWIRLING CLOUD, ITS STRUCTURE CLOSE TO BREAKING POINT FROM THE TREMENDOUS POUNDING IT WAS TAKING. TOM DAVIS, DON'S CO-PILOT AND NAVIGATOR, SAT WITH HIS EYES GLUED TO HIS INSTRUMENTS.

NOT FAR
NOW, SKIPPER.

SUDDENLY, THEY WERE OUT OF THE CLOUDS AND BLAZING SUNSHINE FILLED THE CABIN. WITH A SIGH OF RELIEF DON TOOK THE DAKOTA DOWN TOWARDS THE THICK GREEN CARPET OF THE BURMA JUNGLE.

KEEP
YOUR EYES SKINNED,
CHAPS - WE'RE
ALMOST THERE!

FLIGHT SERGEANT 'MAC' MACPHERSON WAS THE FIRST TO SPOT THE CHINDITS' SIGNAL.

SMOKE,
SKIPPER...OVER
TO PORT.

OKAY,
MAC, GET READY
TO DROP!

BUT AS THE DAKOTA WHEELED OVERHEAD,
A SIGNAL LAMP WINKED SKYWARDS...

THEY'RE FLASHING
US! TWO... MEN...
NEED... URGENT...
MEDICAL... ATTENTION
... CAN... YOU...
LAND? THAT'S THE
LOT, SKIPPER!

AND ENOUGH,
TOO! OKAY, FELLERS,
HOLD ON TO YOUR HATS
... WE'RE GOING
DOWN!



A NARROW RUNWAY HAD BEEN HACKED OUT OF THE
JUNGLE AND USING EVERY OUNCE OF HIS SKILL, DON
SET THE AIRCRAFT DOWN ON THE ROUGH SURFACE.

GOOD OLD
R.A.F. HE'S
DONE IT!



BRAKING HARD, THE MACHINE LURCHED TO A STANDSTILL AND THE ROAR OF THE MOTORS DIED. TOM DAVIS LOOKED AT DON IN SURPRISE...

AM I HEARING THINGS? OR WAS THAT THE SOUND OF FIRING?

TOO DARNED RIGHT IT WAS! COME ON...LET'S GET WEAVING!

AS THE WORK OF UNLOADING BEGAN, MORE BURSTS OF FIRING SOUNDED FROM THE JUNGLE TO THE EAST.

LOOKS AS THOUGH YOU'VE BEEN HAVING QUITE A PARTY.

WE CERTAINLY HAVE...AND IT'S NOT OVER YET! HURRY IT UP THERE, MEN!

THE MEN WORKED WITH URGENT HASTE, SPURRED ON BY THE RAPIDLY APPROACHING GUNFIRE.

STEADY, HARRY, MIND HIS LEGS.

Jungle Aflame



BULLETS WERE WHISTLING ACROSS THE CLEARING AS
DON AND TOM SPRIED FOR THE DAKOTA—AND ONE
OF THEM FOUND A MARK.



INSTANTLY DON SWUNG ROUND AND SPRANG TO THE AID OF HIS CO-PILOT...

KEEP GOING, TOM! YOU CAN MAKE IT!



A BURST OF MACHINE GUN FIRE FROM THE JUNGLE'S EDGE CLAWED UP THE GROUND AT HIS FEET AS DON HELPED THE WOUNDED MAN INTO THE AIRCRAFT.

OKAY, SKIPPER, I'VE GOT HIM.

THANKS, MAC.



VALIANTLY THE HANDFUL OF BRITISH SOLDIERS REDOUBLED THEIR FIRE AT THE JAPS, BUT THEY WERE OUTNUMBERED THREE TO ONE, AND THE DAKOTA SWUNG ROUND AMIDST A HAIL OF ENEMY BULLETS.



NEAT HOLES LACED THE WINGS AND FUSELAGE BUT DON REFUSED TO BE FLUSTERED. THIS WAS JUST ONE MORE OF THE MANY HAZARDS WHICH HAD TO BE FACED BY THE CREWS OF BURMA'S TRANSPORT COMMAND.



THE DAKOTA PICKED UP SPEED, BUMPING AND JOLTING OVER THE ROUGH RUNWAY. THE TREES RUSHED TOWARDS IT AS DON HAULED THE STICK BACK, PRAYING THAT SHE WOULD LIFT. SHE DID—THOUGH THE WHEELS CLIPPED THE TREE TOPS AS THEY SWUNG UP INTO THEIR RECESSES IN THE WINGS.

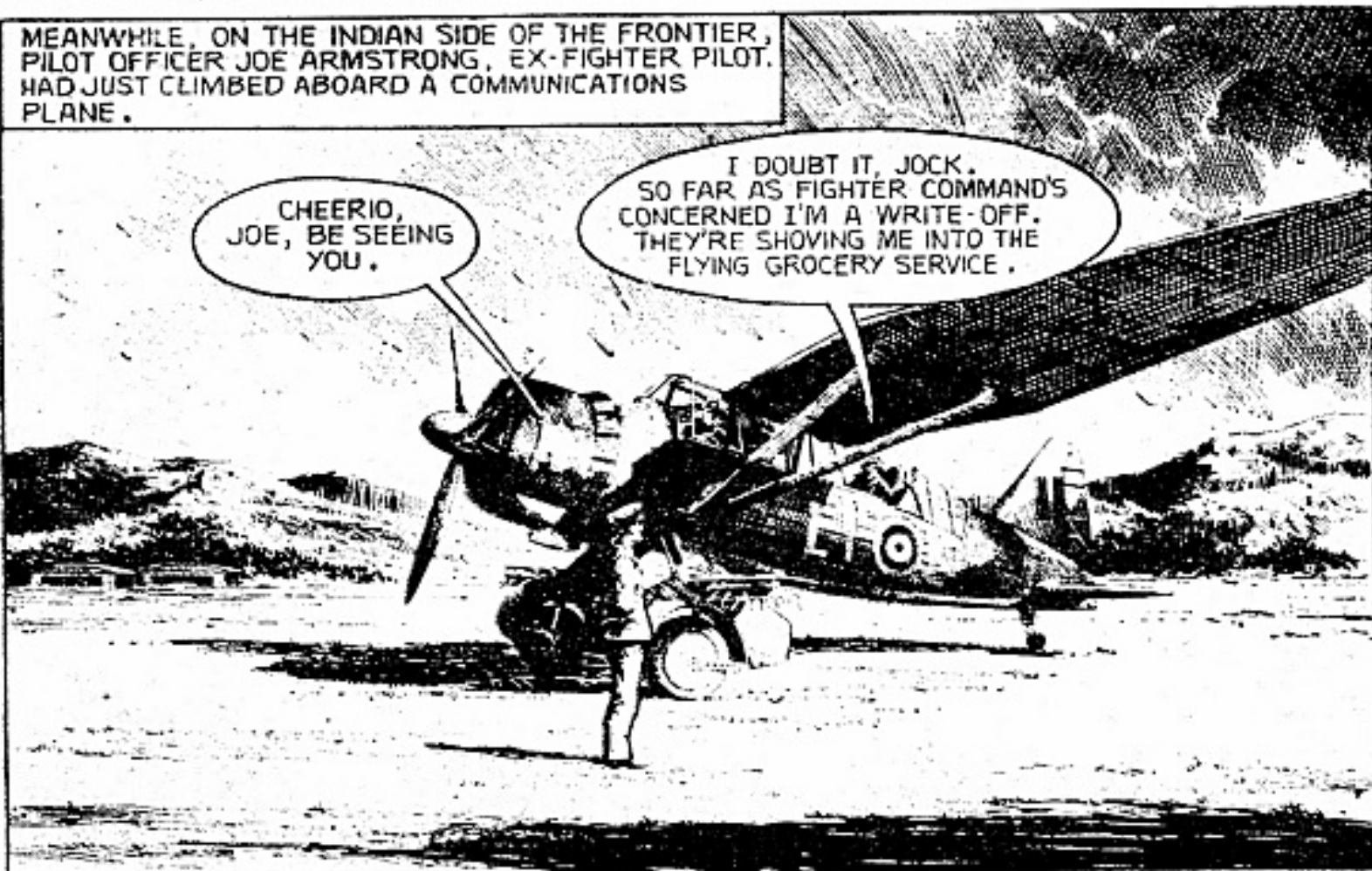
THREE OF THE WOUNDED HAVE BEEN HIT AGAIN, SKIPPER, NONE OF THEM SERIOUSLY, THANK HEAVENS. MAC'S SEEING TO THEM NOW.

AGH—
MADE IT!

MEANWHILE, ON THE INDIAN SIDE OF THE FRONTIER, PILOT OFFICER JOE ARMSTRONG, EX-FIGHTER PILOT, HAD JUST CLIMBED ABOARD A COMMUNICATIONS PLANE.

CHEERIO,
JOE, BE SEEING
YOU.

I DOUBT IT, JOCK.
SO FAR AS FIGHTER COMMAND'S
CONCERNED I'M A WRITE-OFF.
THEY'RE SHOVING ME INTO THE
FLYING GROCERY SERVICE.



BITTERLY THE YOUNG PILOT OFFICER SLUMPED DOWN IN HIS SEAT, THINKING OVER THE EVENTS OF THE PAST FEW MONTHS. HE HAD STARTED OFF AS A FIGHTER PILOT, AND THEN, WITH EIGHT 'KILLS' TO HIS CREDIT, HIS LUCK HAD RUN OUT. HIS HURRICANE HAD BEEN SHOT UP AND HE HAD BEEN SEVERELY INJURED. NOW, FOLLOWING SEVERAL MONTHS IN HOSPITAL, HE WAS BEING TRANSFERRED TO TRANSPORT COMMAND.

OF ALL THE ROTTEN LUCK. THIS JUST ABOUT FINISHES THE WAR FOR ME.

CHEER UP, MATE. THE WORLD HASN'T COME TO AN END YET!

JOE'S NEW POSTING WAS TO A JUNGLE AIRSTRIP FROM WHICH TWO SQUADRONS OF DAKOTA TRANSPORTS OPERATED, AND A FEW HOURS AFTER HIS ARRIVAL...

THIS NEW MAN, PILOT OFFICER ARMSTRONG, IS GOING TO BE A TOUGH CUSTOMER, DON. HE THINKS TRANSPORT COMMAND IS A DEAD LOSS... THAT'S WHY I'M MAKING HIM YOUR CO-PILOT. MAYBE YOU'LL BE ABLE TO KNOCK SOME SENSE INTO HIM WHILE HE'S LEARNING THE ROPES.

I'LL DO MY BEST, SIR.

WHEN DON MET THE EX-FIGHTER PILOT, HOWEVER, HE FOUND THAT THE C.O. HAD NOT EXAGGERATED WHEN HE CALLED JOE 'A TOUGH CUSTOMER'.

WHAT'S UP, GEORGE?

JOE, HERE, HAS JUST BEEN TELLING ME THAT WE NEVER SEE ANY ACTION IN TRANSPORT COMMAND... WE'RE JUST A ROUTINE DELIVERY SERVICE. NO ACTION... MY STARS! JUST WAIT TILL HE FINDS HIMSELF WITH A ZERO ON HIS TAIL!

DON GRINNED. LIKE HIMSELF, GEORGE BURROWS HAD BEEN FLYING DAKOTAS ALL THROUGH THE BURMA CAMPAIGN... AND ONLY A FEW MONTHS EARLIER HE HAD BEEN SHOT DOWN AND HAD HAD TO WALK BACK OVER MORE THAN A HUNDRED MILES OF MOUNTAIN RIDGES WHICH WERE COVERED WITH STEAMING, JAP-INFESTED JUNGLE.

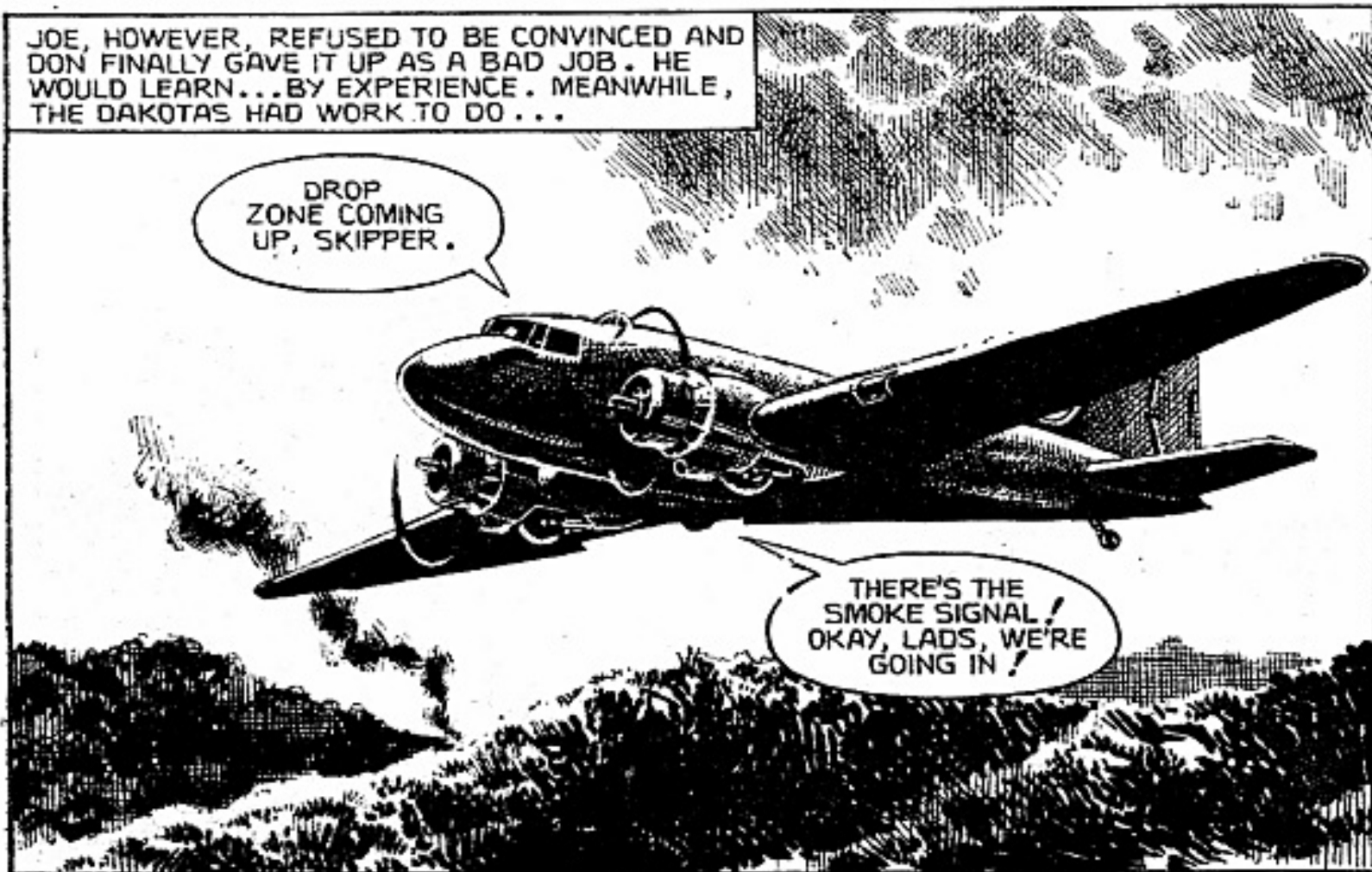
I DON'T THINK YOU NEED WORRY, JOE. WITH THINGS AS THEY ARE NOW WE'LL BE ABLE TO PROVIDE YOU WITH ALL THE THRILLS YOU WANT... AND A FEW MORE BESIDES! YOU'LL BE FLYING AS MY CO-PILOT, BY THE WAY... I'M DON RUTHERFORD.



JOE, HOWEVER, REFUSED TO BE CONVINCED AND DON FINALLY GAVE IT UP AS A BAD JOB. HE WOULD LEARN... BY EXPERIENCE. MEANWHILE, THE DAKOTAS HAD WORK TO DO...

DROP
ZONE COMING
UP, SKIPPER.

THERE'S THE
SMOKE SIGNAL!
OKAY, LADS, WE'RE
GOING IN!



SLOWLY THE DAKOTA CIRCLED OVER THE RISING SMOKE, WHILE ITS CARGO OF FOOD, AMMUNITION AND MAIL FLOATED DOWN TO THE WAITING TROOPS.

THAT'S THE LOT, SKIPPER.

AND IT'S BEEN A PIECE OF CAKE. JUST LIKE I ALWAYS SAID... NOTHING BUT A FLYING GROCERY SERVICE!

THIS TIME MAYBE. BUT IT'S NOT ALWAYS LIKE THIS, JOE—YOU'LL FIND OUT!

ON THE VERY NEXT FLIGHT JOE LEARNED WHAT FLYING THROUGH THE MONSOON WAS REALLY LIKE.

FOR PETE'S SAKE! YOU'RE NEVER GOING TO FLY IN THIS WEATHER? THE CLOUD'S RIGHT DOWN ON THE DECK.

MAYBE, BUT IT'S CLEAR ON THE BURMA SIDE. THOSE BOYS OVER THERE HAVE GOT TO EAT—AND FIGHT! IT'S OUR JOB TO SEE THEY DO!

GRIMLY JOE CLAMBERED ABOARD THE PLANE. HE WAS IN THE AIR FORCE TO FIGHT JAPS, NOT THE WEATHER. BUT DON WAS THE SKIPPER, AND IF HE SAID THEY WERE GOING TO FLY... THEN FLY THEY WOULD.

MY STARS! WHAT A WAY TO FIGHT A WAR!

THEY WERE HIGH OVER THE FRONTIER MOUNTAIN RANGE WHEN THEY HIT TROUBLE. IT STARTED WITH AN EYE-SEARING FLASH OF LIGHT... AND THEN THE DAKOTA DROPPED LIKE A STONE.

WHAT THE...?

LIGHTNING!
LOOKS AS THOUGH WE'RE
IN FOR SOME REAL DIRTY
WEATHER.



THE MACHINE FELL MORE THAN FIVE HUNDRED FEET BEFORE DON COULD PULL IT OUT. BLUE FLAME FLICKERED ROUND THE PROPELLERS AND ALONG THE WINGS, WHILE THE DIN OUTSIDE ROSE TO AN APPALLING CRESCENDO..



FOR NEARLY TWENTY MINUTES THE DAKOTA FOUGHT ITS WAY THROUGH ONE OF THE WORST ELECTRIC STORMS DON HAD EVER WITNESSED.



BUT AT LAST THEIR ORDEAL CAME TO AN END...

PHEW! THANK GOODNESS THAT'S OVER! I'VE NEVER BEEN SO GLAD TO SEE A SPOT OF BLUE SKY!

STILL THINK THERE ARE NO THRILLS IN THE TRANSPORT SERVICE, JOE?



SO WHAT? THIS KIND OF THING'S NO USE TO A YOUNG CHAP LIKE ME. I WANT REAL ACTION... FIGHTING THE JAPS!

THE REST OF THAT TRIP WENT OFF SMOOTHLY ENOUGH, AND BACK ON THE AIRSTRIP...

HE'S ALWAYS TALKING ABOUT FIGHTING, BUT I WONDER HOW HE'D SHAPE IF A BUNCH OF ZEROS JUMPED US.

WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF HIM, SKIPPER?



HE'S A GOOD NAVIGATOR AND A FIRST-CLASS PILOT... THERE'S NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT. BUT HE'S A REAL TOUGH NUT, AND NO MISTAKE!

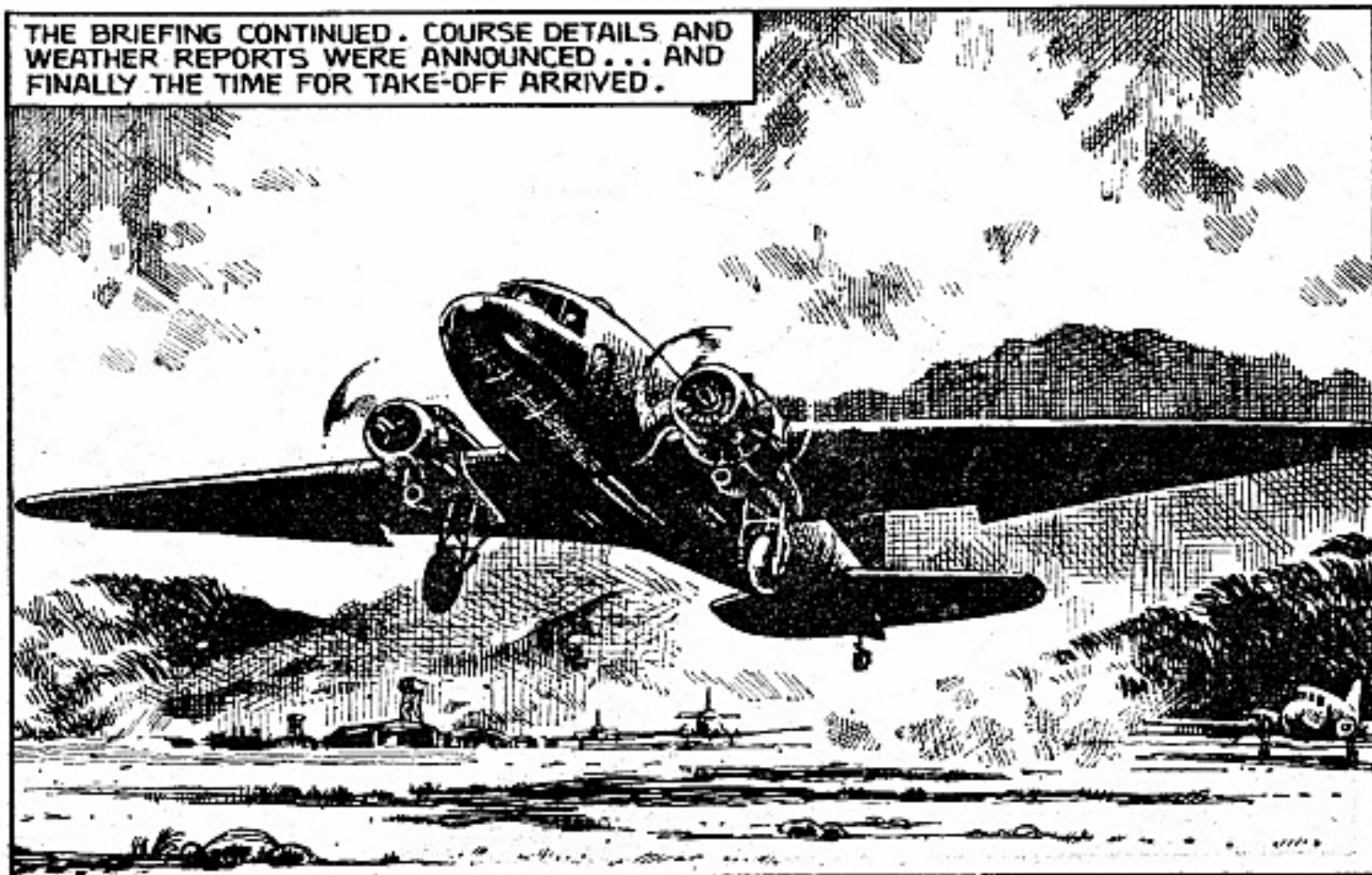
Chapter 2. Skies of Battle

DICK CORRAN'S QUERY WAS SOMETHING ABOUT WHICH DON, TOO, HAD BEEN WONDERING. BUT JOE'S COURAGE AND THAT OF ALL OF THEM WAS SOON TO BE PUT TO THE TEST. A FEW WEEKS AFTER JOE'S ARRIVAL THE BRITISH OFFENSIVE BEGAN...

... A COMPANY OF ENGINEERS ARE BRIDGING THE CHINDWIN AT THIS POINT. IT WILL BE YOUR JOB TO KEEP THEM SUPPLIED... AND THE FIRST DROP HAS BEEN TIMED FOR ELEVEN HUNDRED HOURS.



THE BRIEFING CONTINUED. COURSE DETAILS AND WEATHER REPORTS WERE ANNOUNCED... AND FINALLY THE TIME FOR TAKE-OFF ARRIVED.



THE FOUR DAKOTAS AND THEIR HURRICANE ESCORT FORMED UP OVER THE JUNGLE-CLAD RIDGES...

THERE'S THE HURRIES... BANG ON TIME!

WHAT WOULDN'T I GIVE TO BE UP THERE IN ONE OF THOSE KITES.

DON SAID NOTHING, AND WITH A SIGH JOE TURNED BACK TO HIS MAPS. LATER, IN THE CLEAR SKIES OVER BURMA, THE ENEMY SWOOPED OUT OF THE SUN...

WE'VE GOT COMPANY, SKIPPER!

LOOKS AS THOUGH WE'RE IN FOR A SPOT OF THAT ACTION YOU'RE ALWAYS TALKING ABOUT, JOE. HANG ON TO YOUR HATS, I'M GOING DOWN!



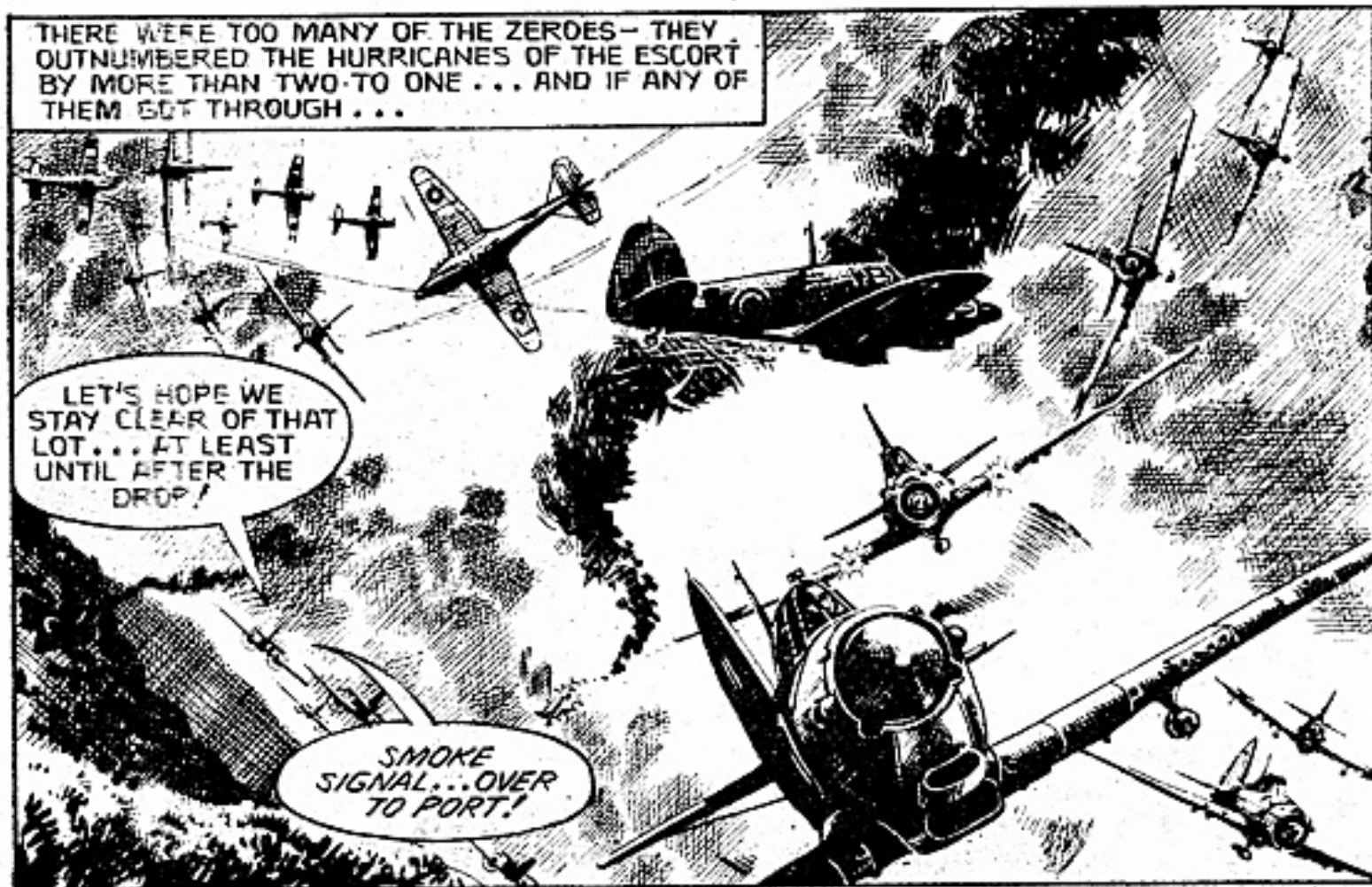
FOLLOWED IN LINE ASTERN BY THE OTHER TRANSPORTS, DON TOOK THE CUMBERSOME DAKOTA DOWN UNTIL ITS SLIPSTREAM WAS WHIZZING OVER THE DARK TREE TOPS. HIGH ABOVE THEM, THE HURRICANES CLAWED UPWARDS IN A SURGE OF POWER TO MEET THE ZEROES.



WHAT DO WE DO NOW? JUST SIT HERE AND WATCH THOSE OTHER CHAPS FIGHT?

NOT MUCH WE COULD DO AGAINST A BUNCH OF ZEROES WITHOUT A GUN BETWEEN US, JOE!

THERE WERE TOO MANY OF THE ZEROES— THEY OUTNUMBERED THE HURRICANES OF THE ESCORT BY MORE THAN TWO TO ONE ... AND IF ANY OF THEM GOT THROUGH ...

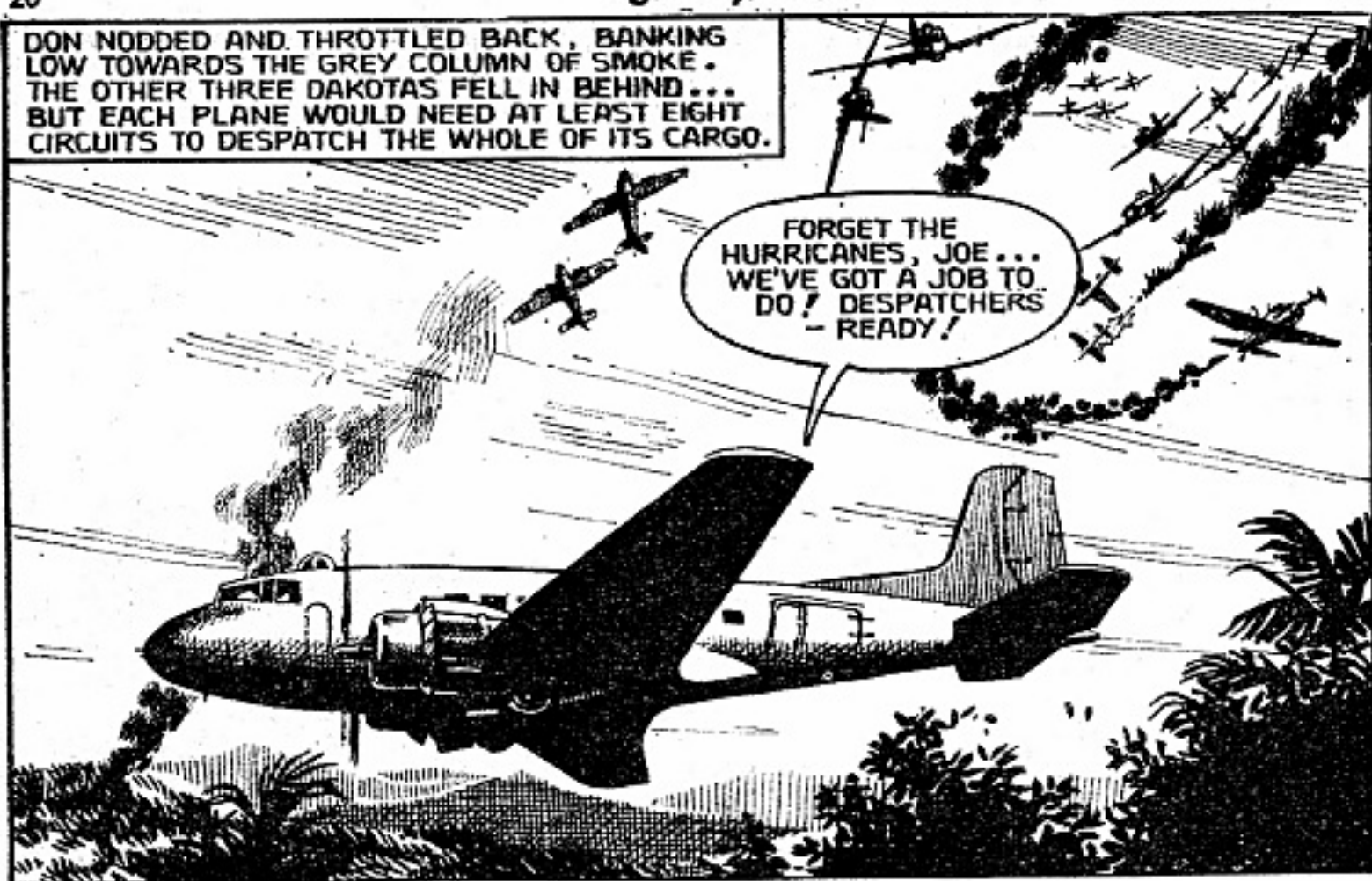


LET'S HOPE WE STAY CLEAR OF THAT LOT... AT LEAST UNTIL AFTER THE DROP!

SMOKE SIGNAL... OVER TO PORT!

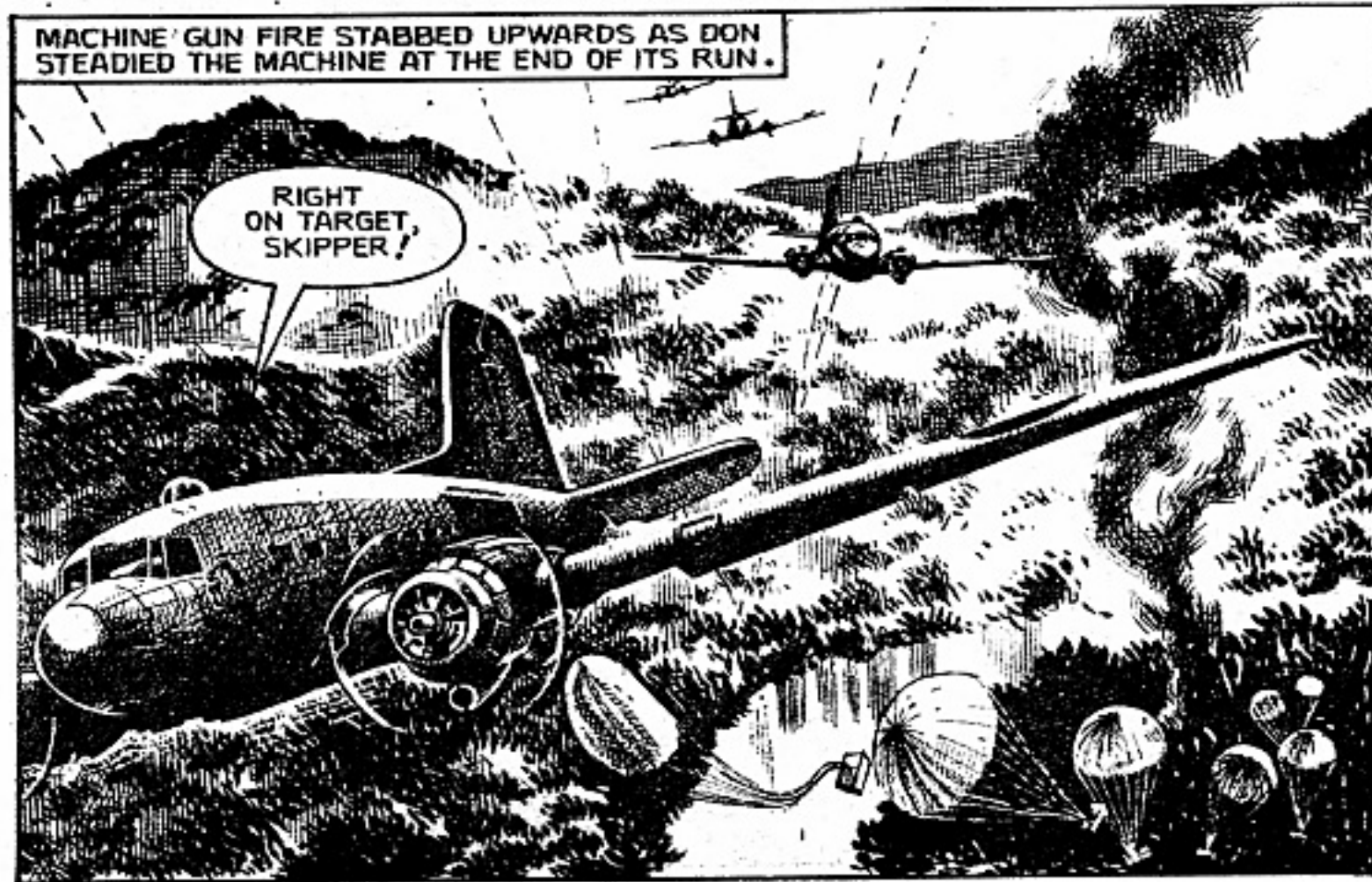
DON NODDED AND THROTTLED BACK, BANKING LOW TOWARDS THE GREY COLUMN OF SMOKE. THE OTHER THREE DAKOTAS FELL IN BEHIND... BUT EACH PLANE WOULD NEED AT LEAST EIGHT CIRCUITS TO DESPATCH THE WHOLE OF ITS CARGO.

FORGET THE HURRICANES, JOE... WE'VE GOT A JOB TO DO! DESPATCHERS - READY!



MACHINE GUN FIRE STABBED UPWARDS AS DON STEADIED THE MACHINE AT THE END OF ITS RUN.

RIGHT ON TARGET, SKIPPER!



THE TRANSPORT PILOT CALMLY BROUGHT THE DAKOTA ROUND FOR ANOTHER RUN, IGNORING THE SCARLET STREAMS OF TRACER FLICKERING PAST THE COCKPIT WINDOWS AND THE OCCASIONAL SHUDDER OF THE PLANE AS BULLETS RIPPED INTO THE FUSELAGE OR WINGS.


MY STARS! LOOK!
ISN'T THAT JOCK'S PLANE —
IT'S BURNING AND THAT ZERO'S
ON TO IT! JOCK!

HE'S GOING
IN! PULL OUT —
PULL OUT!

WITH AN EYE-SEARING FLASH OF FLAME, THE STRICKEN DAKOTA PLOUGHED INTO THE JUNGLE-COVERED HILLSIDE. THE CREW OF FOUR PERISHED WITH THEIR PLANE FOR AT ZERO FEET THERE WAS NO HOPE OF BALING OUT.




HORROR-STRICKEN, JOE STARED DOWN DAZEDLY AT THE UGLY CRIMSON SCAR ON THE HILLSIDE. IT HAD ALL HAPPENED SO QUICKLY—AND THE MISSION MUST GO ON.



THOSE POOR
BLIGHTERS... THEY
NEVER HAD A
CHANCE!

DAY AFTER DAY, THE DAKOTAS FLEW OUT INTO THE HOSTILE SKIES. USUALLY THE ZEROES WERE WAITING FOR THEM AND THE TRANSPORT CREWS DARED NOT RELAX THEIR VIGILANCE FOR A SINGLE INSTANT.



ONE THING'S CERTAIN,
DON... THE NIPS HAVE GOT
AN AIRSTRIP SOMEWHERE
NEAR THAT BRIDGE. APART
FROM THE ATTACKS ON YOUR
PLANES, THE ENGINEERS ARE
UNDER ATTACK AT DAWN AND
DUSK EVERY DAY... IN OTHER
WORDS, WHENEVER OUR
FIGHTERS ARE OUT OF
THE WAY.

DON NODDED THOUGHTFULLY. IT TOOK THE BRITISH FIGHTERS SOME TIME TO REACH THE ENGINEERS' POSITION, AND SINCE THEY COULD NOT USE THE ROUGH JUNGLE AIRSTRIPS DURING THE HOURS OF DARKNESS, THE JAPS HAD AN HOUR OR MORE AT DAWN AND DUSK WHEN THEY WERE VIRTUALLY FREE FROM INTERFERENCE.

CAN'T OUR RECCE PLANES FIND THEIR BASE?

NO. THEY'VE BEEN OUT EVERY DAY THIS WEEK. THEY'VE COMBED EVERY FOOT OF THAT AREA AND PHOTOGRAPHED IT... BUT THERE'S NOTHING... NOTHING AT ALL.

MEANWHILE, ON THE BANKS OF THE CHINDWIN RIVER...

LOOK OUT, BERT! HERE COMES ANOTHER OF THE PERISHERS.

THE ZERO STAGGERED AS BULLETS BIT INTO IT BUT IT SHEERED OFF, TRAILING SMOKE. OTHERS TOOK ITS PLACE AND A HAIL OF CANNON SHELLS TORE INTO THE PARTLY CONSTRUCTED BRIDGE.



IF THOSE ZEROES
AREN'T SOON PINNED DOWN
WE'LL NEVER FINISH THE JOB
IN TIME. THEY'RE WRECKING
THE BRIDGE AS FAST AS
WE CAN BUILD IT.

THEY'RE
STAYING LONGER
THAN USUAL THIS
MORNING.

MAJOR WHITEWAY GLANCED AT HIS WATCH... AND AT THE SAME MOMENT A BURST OF RIFLE AND MACHINE GUN FIRE ECHOED FROM THE FAR SHORE.

THE
TRANSPORTS WILL
BE HERE IN LESS THAN
HALF AN HOUR...

SOUNDS AS THOUGH
OUR BOYS OVER THERE ARE
HAVING ANOTHER DUST UP. THE
DARNED NIPS SEEM TO HAVE
PATROLS EVERYWHERE.

LOOK OUT,
SIR! DUCK!

WITH A SCREAMING ROAR THAT BATTERED
THE EARDRUMS THE ZERO SWEEP LOW
OVER THE RIVER... AND A STREAM OF
CANNON SHELLS TORE UP THE GROUND
ALONG THE LIP OF THE MAJOR'S TRENCH.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER THE ZEROES WERE STILL THERE, SAVAGELY STRAFING THE ENGINEERS AND THEIR BRIDGE. AND THEN, FROM OUT OF THE WEST, CAME THE FAMILIAR DRONE OF DAKOTAS.




SWIFTLY THE ZEROES WHEELED UPWARDS... THE JAPANESE FLIGHT COMMANDER WAS ALSO QUICK TO SIGHT THE UNWIELDY DAKOTAS AND HIS RADIO CRACKLED INTO LIFE...

LEADER CALLING!
NUMBERS TWO, THREE AND
FOUR... FOLLOW ME! THE
REST OF YOU... KEEP THE
FIGHTERS OCCUPIED!
ATTACK!

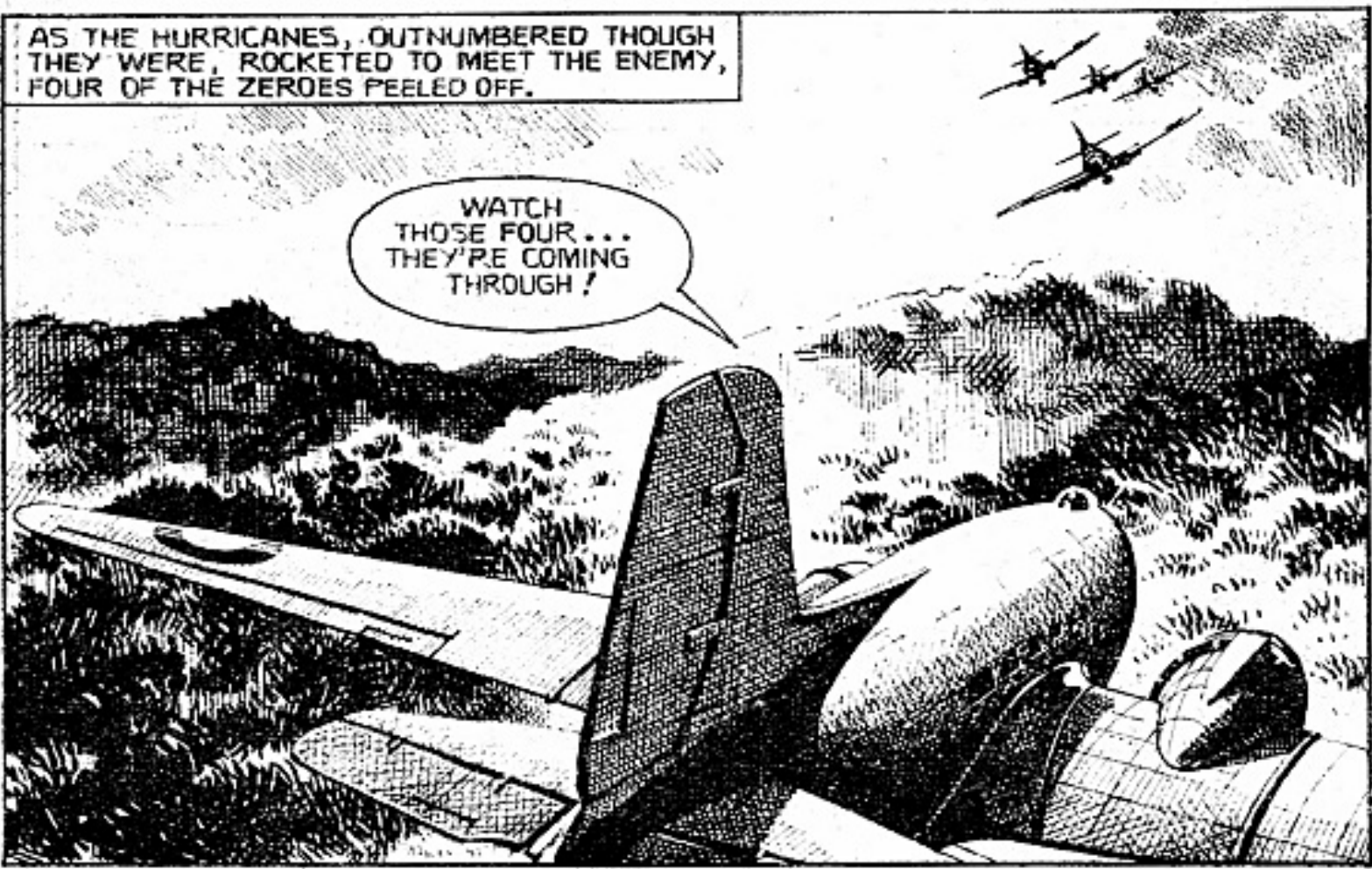


ALREADY THE DAKOTAS WERE NOSING DOWN TO TREE-TOP LEVEL—FOR ONLY THERE COULD THEY FIND COMPARATIVE SAFETY.



OUR BOYS'LL NEVER HOLD THAT LOT OFF. THEY HAVEN'T A CHANCE!

AS THE HURRICANES, OUTNUMBERED THOUGH THEY WERE, ROCKETED TO MEET THE ENEMY, FOUR OF THE ZEROES PEELLED OFF.



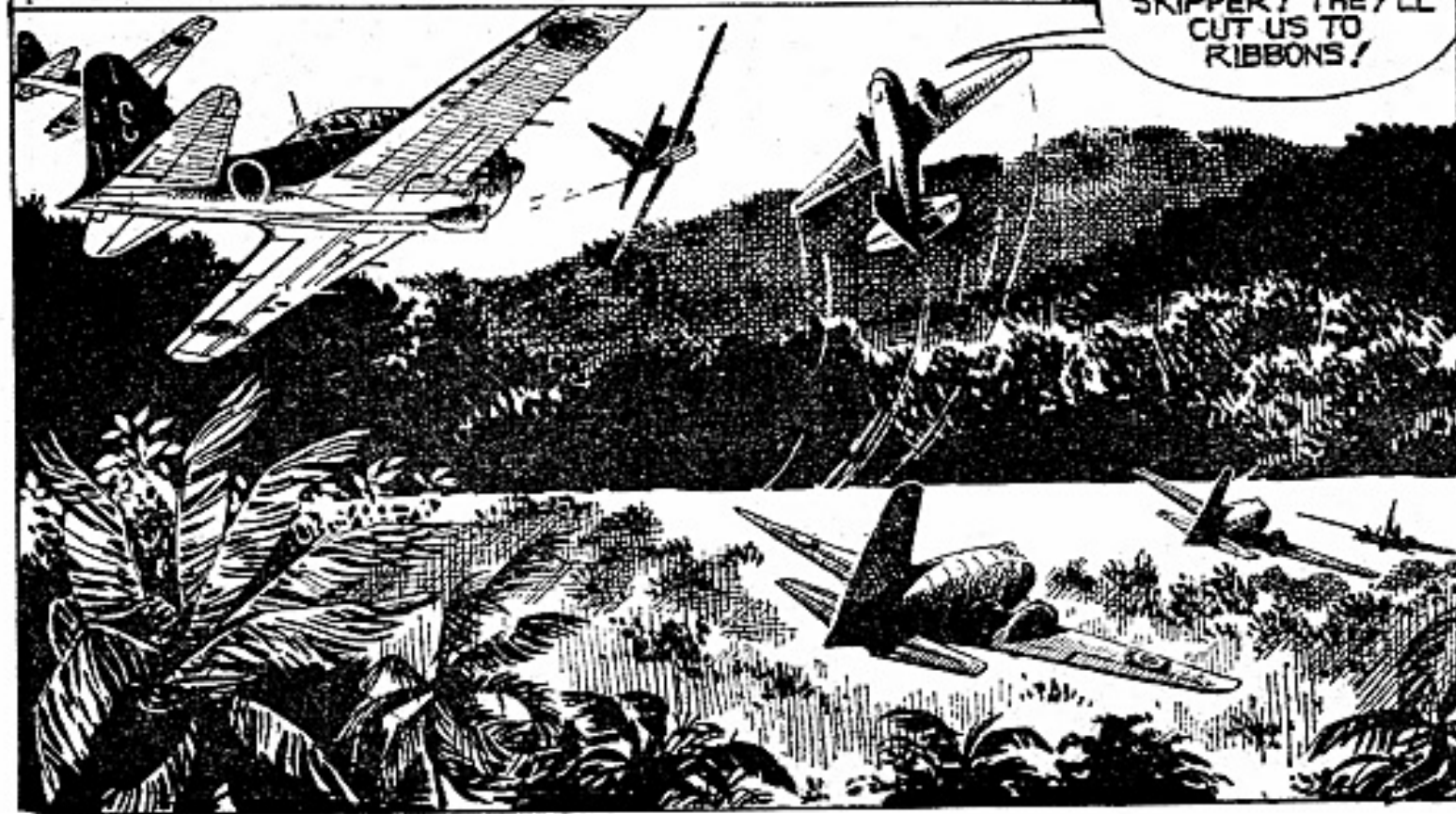
WATCH THOSE FOUR... THEY'RE COMING THROUGH!

DON PUSHED THE NOSE DOWN UNTIL THE DAKOTA WAS ALMOST BRUSHING THE TOPMOST BRANCHES. A GLANCE BEHIND, TOLD HIM THE OTHER TRANSPORTS WERE FOLLOWING HIM...

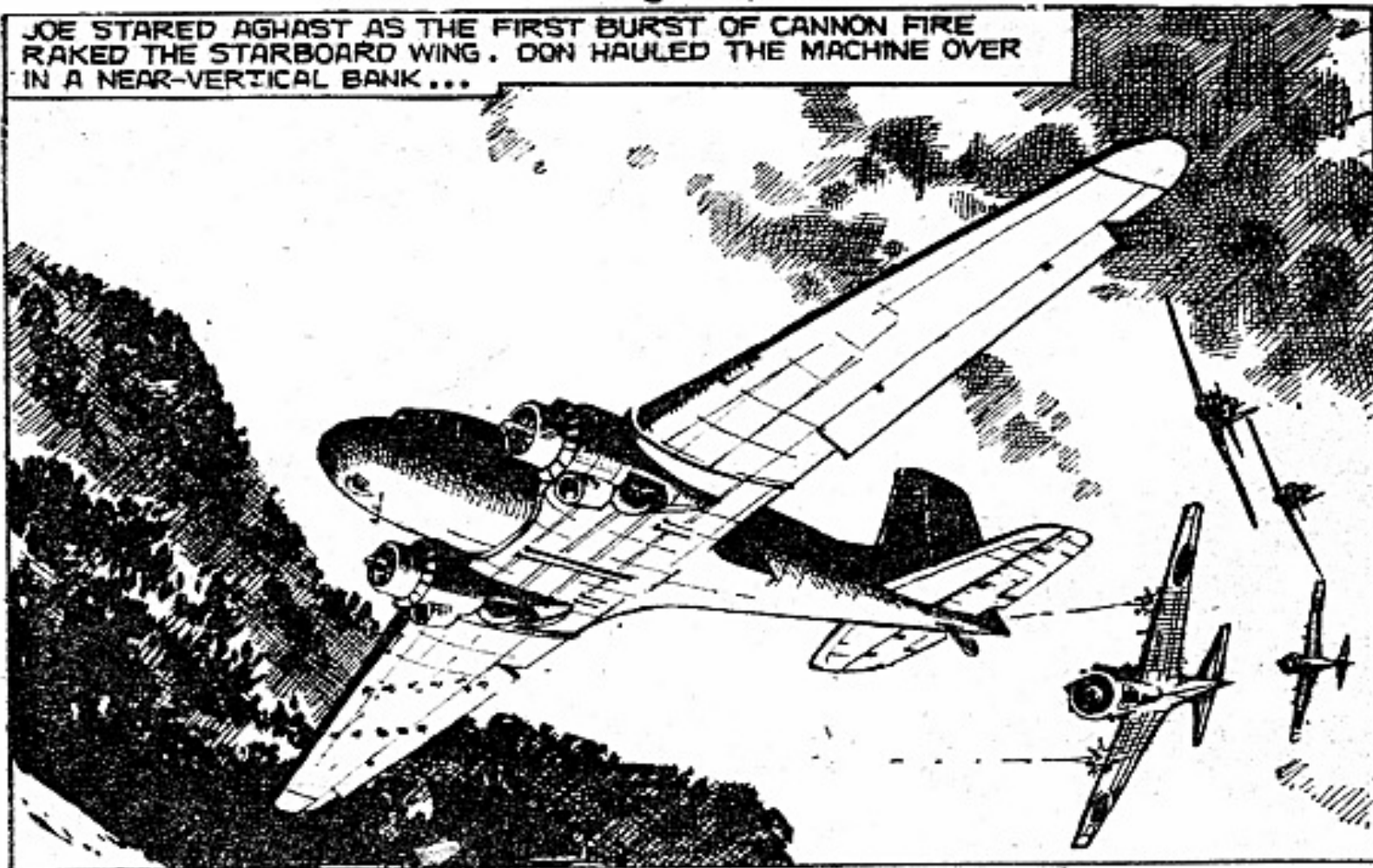


THEN DON PULLED BACK THE STICK, DELIBERATELY OFFERING HIS PLANE AS A TARGET TO THE ZEROES, WHILE THE OTHER THREE TRANSPORTS LUMBERED TOWARDS THE SAFETY OF THE OPPOSITE HILLSIDE...

FOR PETE'S SAKE, KEEP DOWN, SKIPPER! THEY'LL CUT US TO RIBBONS!



JOE STARED AGHAST AS THE FIRST BURST OF CANNON FIRE RAKED THE STARBOARD WING. DON HAULED THE MACHINE OVER IN A NEAR-VERTICAL BANK...



THE TREE-COVERED CREST OF THE RIDGE LOOMED AHEAD... AND JOE'S VOICE ROSE TO A FRANTIC SHOUT.

LOOK OUT!
WE'LL HIT THE
TREES!



BUT DON HELD THE DAKOTA STEADY— AND THE ZEROS CLOSED IN BEHIND HIM FOR A KILLING BURST.

COME ON, YOU
RATS... GET US
IF YOU CAN!



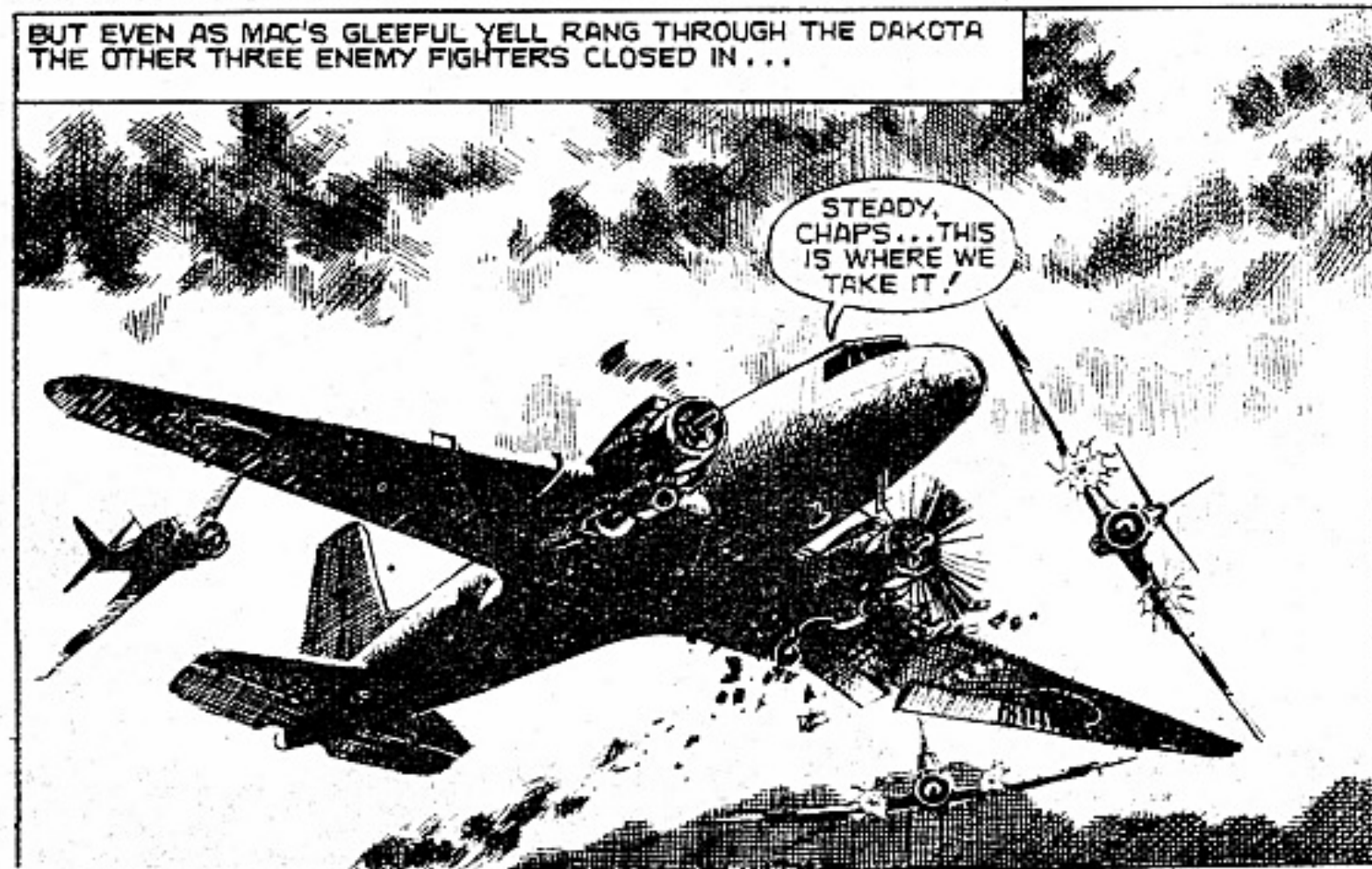
AT THE LAST POSSIBLE INSTANT, HE DRAGGED THE DAKOTA UP, ITS FUSELAGE AND WINGS CREAKING AND GROANING. THE ZERO PILOT WAS TOO SLOW...

WOW! THERE GOES JAP NUMBER ONE!



BUT EVEN AS MAC'S GLEEFUL YELL RANG THROUGH THE DAKOTA THE OTHER THREE ENEMY FIGHTERS CLOSED IN...

STEADY, CHAPS... THIS IS WHERE WE TAKE IT!



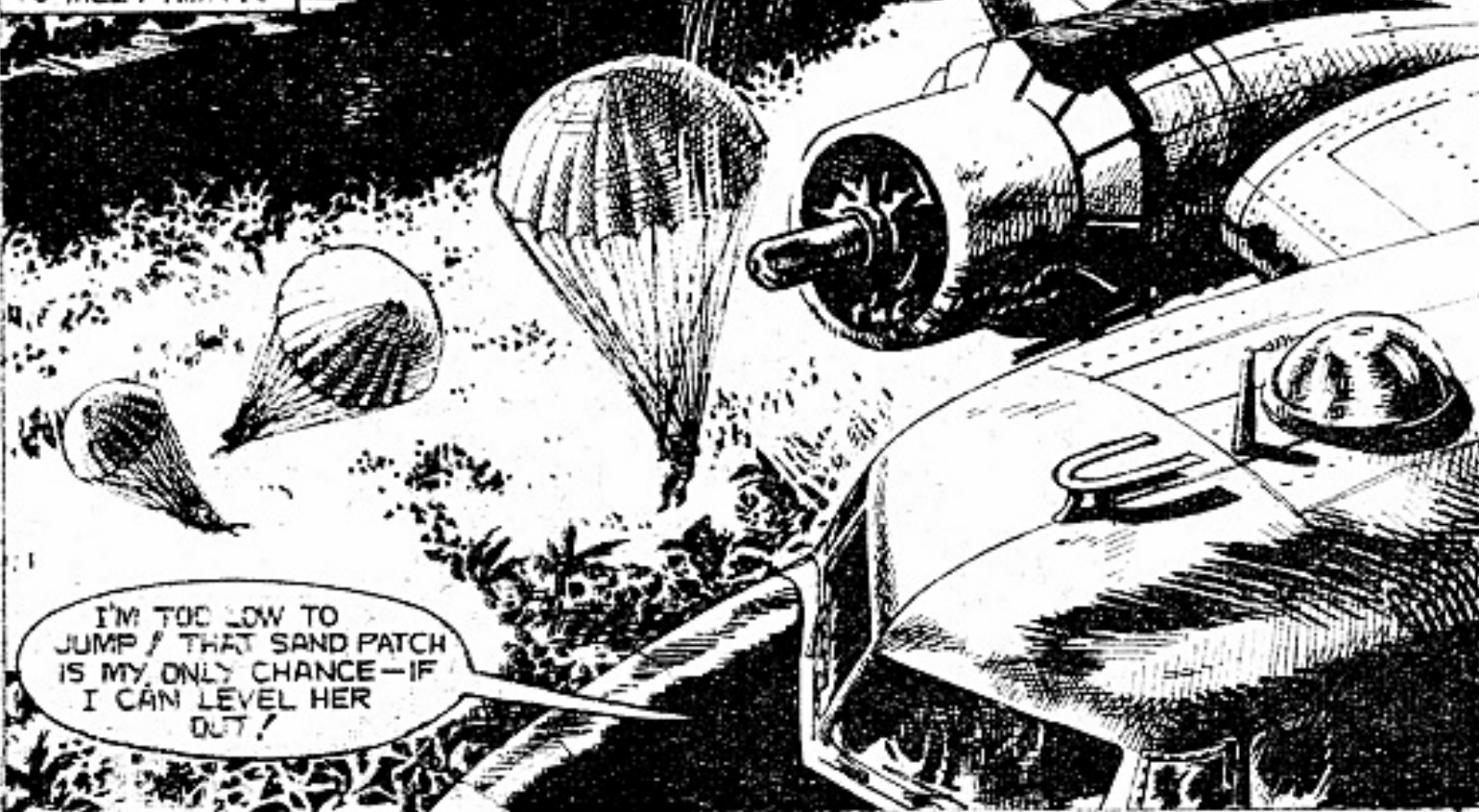
THE GREAT MACHINE STAGGERED AS IT WAS CAUGHT IN A MURDEROUS CROSSFIRE. ABOVE THEM, THREE HURRICANES CAME SNARLING VENGEFULLY DOWN...



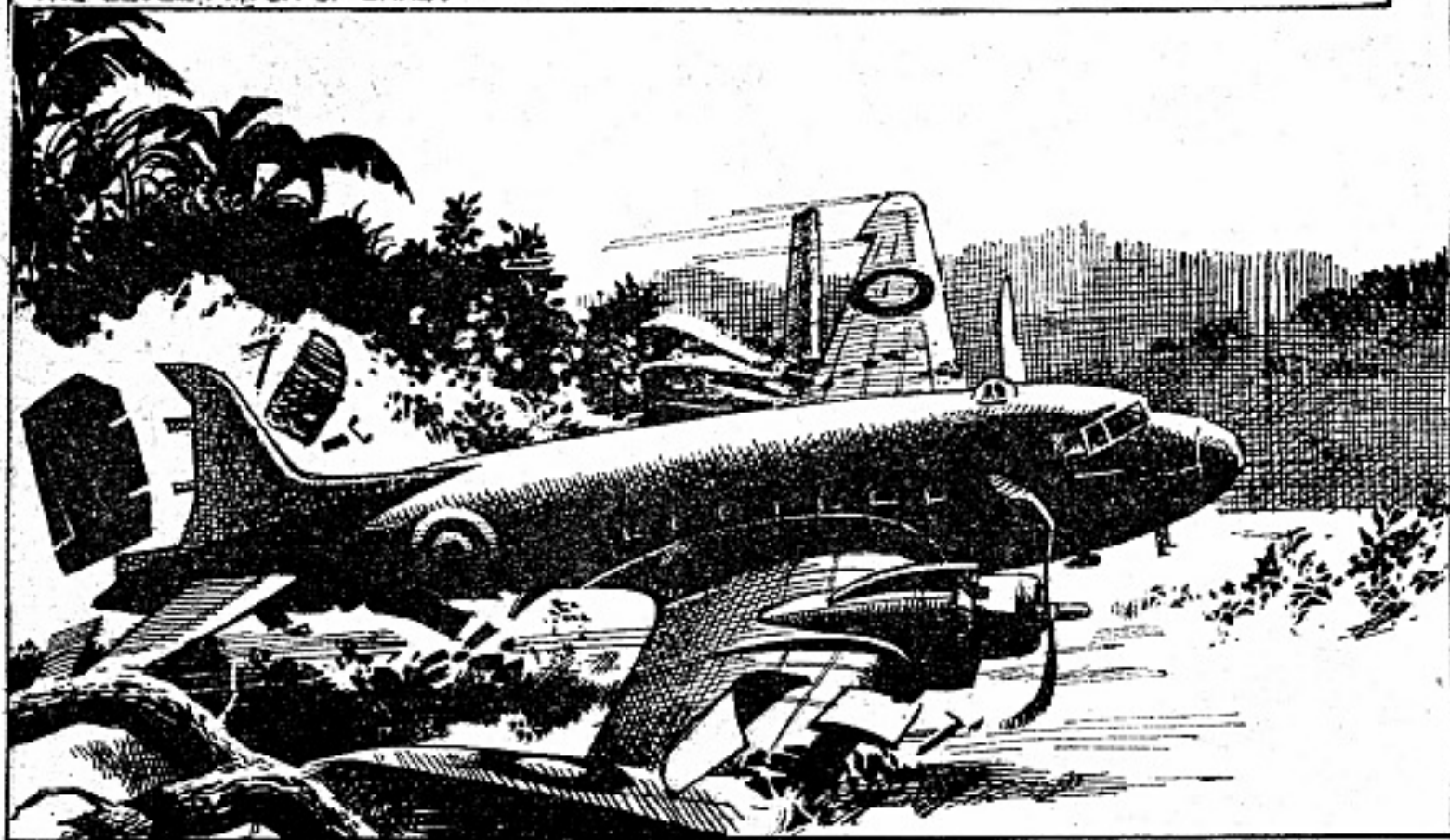
ONE ENGINE BURNING FIERCELY, THE DAKOTA WAS SLOW TO PICK UP THE HEIGHT THEY DESPERATELY NEEDED.



ONE BY ONE THE CREW STEPPED OUT INTO SPACE. DON SAW JOE'S PARACHUTE BLOSSOM BELOW HIM, AND THEN GLANCED BACK AT THE ALTIMETER. IN SPITE OF ALL HIS EFFORTS, THE TREES WERE RUSHING TO MEET HIM...



THERE WAS NO POWER OR ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE AND THE DAKOTA PLOUGHED THROUGH TREES AND UNDERGROWTH AS DON TRIED TO HOLD IT IN THE AIR LONG ENOUGH TO REACH THE LEVEL PATCH OF SAND.



FLAMES STREAMING FROM THE DAMAGED MOTOR BEGAN TO LICK HUNGRILY ALONG THE FUSELAGE AS THE PLANE SHUDDERED TO A HALT. DON TORE FRANTICALLY AT THE STRAPS WHICH HELD HIM...

GOT TO... GET FREE! SHE'LL... BLOW UP... ANY MINUTE!



SOMEHOW HE GOT OUT, BUT HE HAD ONLY COVERED A FEW YARDS WHEN A SEARING BLAST OF FLAME AND HEAT SENT HIM SPRAWLING HEADLONG INTO THE JUNGLE...

AAGH!



FOR A FEW MINUTES, DON LAY WHERE HE HAD FALLEN, TOO STUNNED TO MOVE. THEN, AS HIS REELING BRAIN STEADIED, HE STAGGERED TO HIS FEET...



FOR TWO HOURS THE YOUNG PILOT FOUGHT HIS WAY THROUGH THE DENSE UNDERGROWTH, TORMENTED BY BUZZING HORDES OF INSECTS.



BUT IT WAS NEARLY HALF AN HOUR LATER BEFORE DON HEARD THE SOUND OF VOICES. OVERJOYED, HE PLUNGED FORWARD...



SO! NOW WE HAVE ALL THE BRITISH DOGS!



SICK WITH DISAPPOINTMENT AND NEAR EXHAUSTION, DON WAS FORCED TO MARCH ALONGSIDE THE OTHERS.

SORRY, CHAPS. I MESSED THAT UP PROPERLY.

IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT, SKIPPER.

IF ONLY WE'D HAD GUNS TO DEFEND OURSELVES...

FOR HOURS THEY WERE MARCHED ALONG THE ROUGH JUNGLE PATH; OVER STEEP, ROCKY RIDGES AND THROUGH SWAMP-FILLED VALLEYS. FINALLY THEY CAME OUT ON A CLIFF-TOP OVERLOOKING THE SWIRLING, YELLOW-BROWN WATERS OF THE CHINDWIN RIVER...

THAT BUSH DOWN THERE GIVES ME AN IDEA! I WONDER...



DON GLANCED AT THE JAPS. THEY WERE CLOSE BEHIND, BUT THEIR GUNS WERE LOOSELY HELD... THEY WERE NOT EXPECTING TROUBLE. NEXT INSTANT...



CONCEALED BY THE LIP OF THE CLIFF EDGE AND THE MASS OF CRUMBLING EARTH AND DEBRIS, DON'S CLAWING FINGERS GRABBED AT A BRANCH OF THE STUNTED BUSH... AND HELD.



BRUISED AND BATTERED HE CLUNG THERE
AS THE AVALANCHE RATTLED PAST.



YELLOW FACES PEERED ENIGMATICALLY OVER THE EDGE
OF THE CLIFF...

THE BRITISH
DOG HAS PERISHED,
CAPTAIN SAN! THERE
IS NO NEED TO
SEARCH.

WHY,
YOU—

GET BACK,
DOG! COME...WE
HAVE WASTED TIME
ENOUGH.



AS THE JAPS' SHRILL VOICES FADED IN THE DISTANCE, DON BEGAN TO CLIMB.



GASPING FOR BREATH, HE HAULED HIMSELF OVER THE CLIFF EDGE...



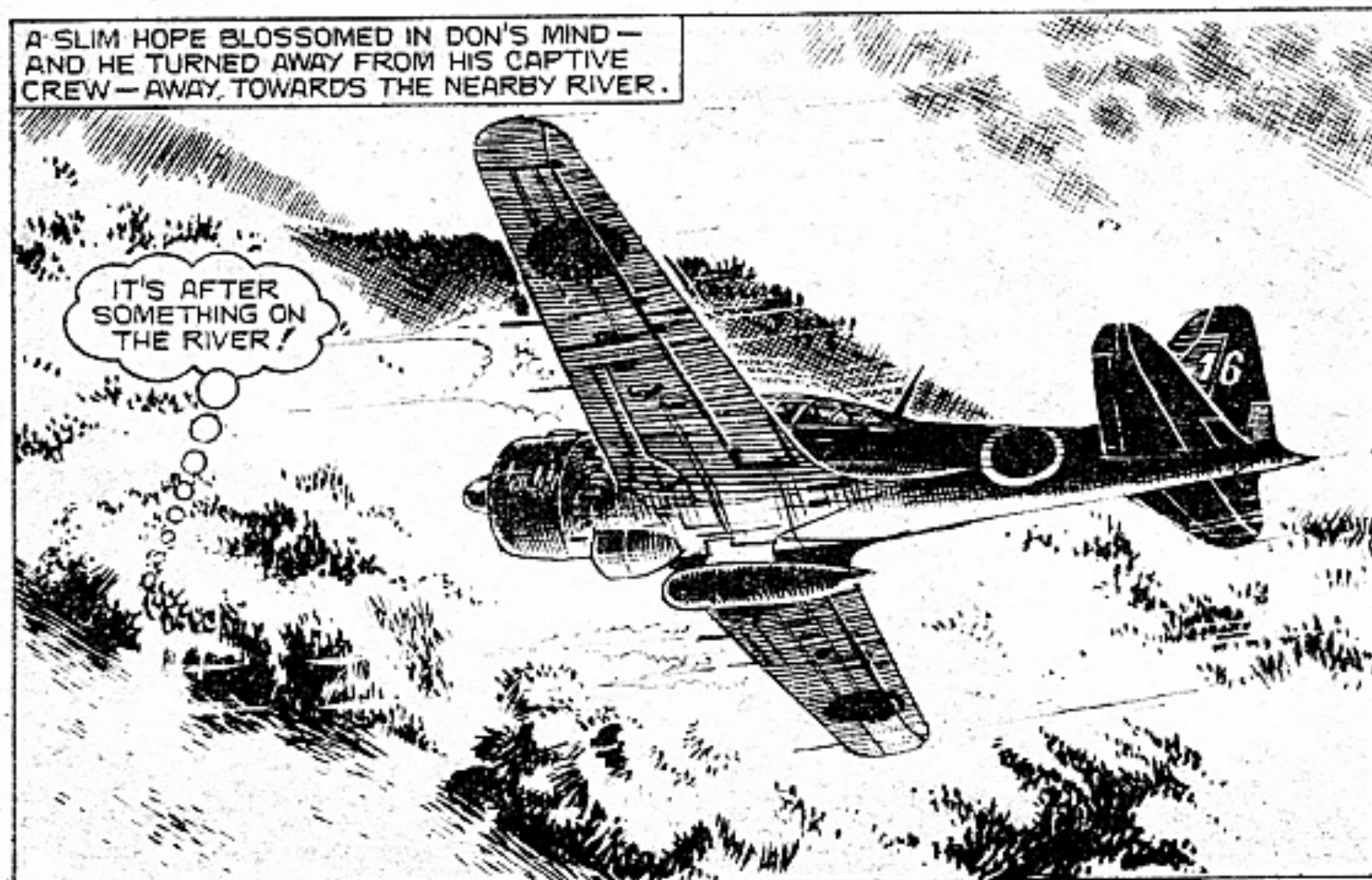
KEEPING CLOSE TO THE COVER OF THE TREES, THE PILOT SET OFF IN PURSUIT OF THE JAPS AND THEIR R.A.F. CAPTIVES.



IT TOOK HIM ALL OF AN HOUR TO CATCH UP WITH AND OUTFLANK HIS QUARRY. JUST AS HE DID SO, HOWEVER, THE RATTLE OF AERIAL GUNFIRE REACHED HIS EARS...



A SLIM HOPE BLOSSOMED IN DON'S MIND — AND HE TURNED AWAY FROM HIS CAPTIVE CREW — AWAY TOWARDS THE NEARBY RIVER.



THE ZERO'S ENGINE NOTE
FACED, THEN GREW TO A
MENACING ROAR AS IT
SWEEPED IN AGAIN JUST AS
DON BURST THROUGH THE
UNDERGROWTH ON TO THE
RIVER BANK ...

MY STARS! IT
CAN'T BE ... BUT IT
IS! A BOATLOAD OF
BRITISH SOLDIERS!



THE JAP FIGHTER'S GUNS CLATTERED VICIOUSLY AS THE
SOLDIERS FRANTICALLY DROVE THEIR NATIVE CRAFT INTO
THE MUDDY SHALLOWS.



AS THE ZERO ZOOMED AWAY, THE SOLDIERS FLUNG THEMSELVES INTO COVER TO JOIN THE R.A.F. PILOT.



HI, LIEUTENANT,
NICE TO SEE YOU! YOU'RE
WAY OFF THE BEATEN
TRACK, THOUGH.

AS A MATTER OF
FACT, WE WERE LOOKING
FOR YOU! WE SAW YOUR
DAKOTA CRASH AND GUESSED
YOU'D HEAD FOR THE RIVER.
WHERE ARE THE OTHERS—
WE SAW THREE CHUTES
OPEN?

THE NIPS HAVE GOT
THEM. THEY'RE NOT FAR AHEAD,
THOUGH. IF WE HURRY, WE SHOULD
BE ABLE TO CATCH THEM
BEFORE DARK.



RIGHT! SMITH,
WILCOX... STAY HERE
WITH THE WOUNDED.
THE REST OF YOU...
LET'S GET WEAVING!

IT DID NOT TAKE LONG TO OVERTAKE THE JAP PATROL WHO WERE RESTING IN A CLEARING. LIEUTENANT LACEY MADE A QUICK RECONNAISSANCE.

MM! ONLY EIGHT OF THEM! SHOULDN'T BE DIFFICULT IF WE ATTACK FROM TWO DIRECTIONS!

GIVE ME A COUPLE OF MEN AND WE'LL DRAW THEIR ATTENTION, WHILE THE REST OF YOU COME UP BEHIND THEM.

LACEY NODDED AND DON AND HIS TWO MEN CIRCLED THE CLEARING CAUTIOUSLY.

STEADY DOES IT, CHAPS! NO NOISE—YET!





THE JAPS, NEVERTHELESS, FOUGHT BACK STUBBORNLY AND COURAGEOUSLY — BUT IN VAIN!

AAGH!



AS LIEUTENANT LACEY GAVE HIS ORDERS, ANOTHER SOUND CAUGHT DON'S EAR...

NICE WORK, LADS. NOW ... WE'D BETTER GET OUT OF HERE — FAST! THERE MAY BE OTHER JAP PATROLS ABOUT. WHAT'S UP, DON?



DON FROWNED IN CONCENTRATION...

THOSE PLANES... OVER TO THE WEST. HEAR 'EM?

WHY, YES. WHAT ABOUT THEM?



THE PILOT GAVE LACEY AN EXCITED LOOK...



THEY'RE ZEROES... AND THEY'RE TAKING OFF! THAT MEANS THEY'VE GOT A LANDING STRIP NOT FAR FROM HERE... PROBABLY THE ONE THAT'S GIVING MAJOR WHITEWAY AND HIS MEN SO MUCH TROUBLE. COME ON...

LACEY WAS STILL PROTESTING AS DON TOOK THE LEAD...



HEY, WAIT A MINUTE! WE'VE ONLY TWENTY MEN... NOT NEARLY ENOUGH TO TAKE ON A JAP AIRFIELD!

YOUR RADIO'S BUSTED SO WE CAN'T SEND A MESSAGE... IT WOULD TAKE AT LEAST TWO DAYS TO WALK BACK... AND THE RIVER'S OUT OF THE QUESTION. BUT THAT BRIDGE MUST BE FINISHED BY TOMORROW NIGHT—SO IT'S UP TO US!

LACEY STROKED HIS CHIN THOUGHTFULLY...



LOCATING THE AIRSTRIP WOULD BE A COMPARATIVELY SIMPLE MATTER... BUT GETTING PAST THE JAPANESE GENTRIES WAS NOT SO EASY...



THEIR LIVES DEPENDED ON THEIR CAUTION, SO THERE WAS NO CARELESSNESS.



Chapter 3. Zero Nest

THE GREEN GLOOM OF THE JUNGLE WAS DEEPENING INTO DUSK WHEN, WITH SURPRISING SUDDENNESS, THE BRITISH PARTY EMERGED ON THE EDGE OF THE LANDING STRIP. THEY STARED BEFORE THEM IN AMAZEMENT...



JOE GAVE A GRUNT OF ANGRY FRUSTRATION...

PITY WE
CAN'T WHISTLE
UP A SQUADRON
OF FIGHTERS
RIGHT NOW.

THAT'S JUST WHAT
WE'RE GOING TO DO. SEE
THAT AERIAL OVER THERE?
WHY DON'T WE USE THE
JAPS' OWN RADIO TO
SEND A MESSAGE.

BY GOLLY!
IT MIGHT
WORK...

DARKNESS HAD FALLEN. WHEN LACEY MOVED
OFF TO THE NORTH, TAKING HALF HIS MEN.
DON WAITED WITH THE OTHER HALF, ELEVEN
MEN IN ALL, COUNTING HIS OWN AIRCREW.

GOOD
LUCK!

THANKS! SAME
TO YOU... WE'RE
GOING TO NEED
IT!

AN HOUR PASSED... TWO HOURS. DON
GLANCED AT HIS WATCH...

RIGHT,
MEN, TIME TO
GO! YOU ALL
KNOW WHAT
TO DO?

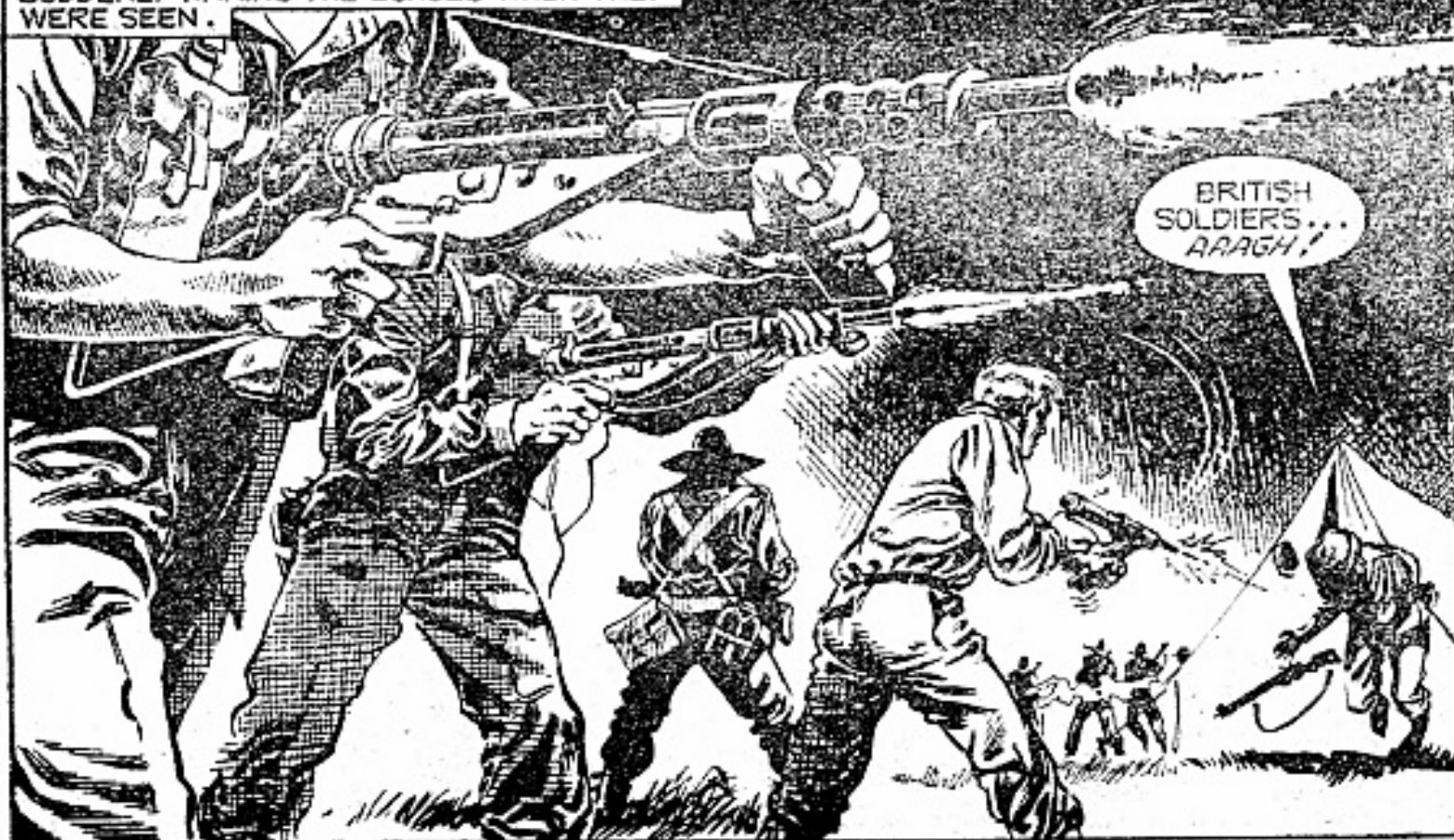
IT TOOK THEM TEN MINUTES TO CUT THROUGH THE WIRE ENTANGLEMENT, BREAKING OFF TO LIE MOTIONLESS IN THE SHADOWS WHENEVER A SENTRY PASSED THEIR WAY. THEN...



THE SERGEANT SLID AWAY INTO THE DARKNESS. THERE WAS A BRIEF SCUFFLE, A DULL THUD...



AT A CROUCHING RUN, DAN LED HIS MEN ON TO THE SHADOWED RUNWAY, THEIR GUNS SUDDENLY WAKING THE ECHOES WHEN THEY WERE SEEN.



AS THEY SMASHED A PATH TO THE ENEMY RADIO TENT, LACEY AND HIS MEN JOINED IN THE ATTACK. CAUGHT IN A WITHERING CROSSFIRE, THE JAPS FELL BACK.

RIGHT, CORPORAL—THE RADIO—IT'S ALL YOURS!

GIVE HIM A HAND, MAC!



NOW THE ALARM WAS REALLY RAISED. THE JAPS, TAKEN BY SURPRISE IN THAT FIRST RUSH, WERE CONVERGING VENGEFULLY ON THE RAIDERS...

SHOOT THEM DOWN! KILL THEM ALL!



A SOLDIER CRUMPLED TO THE GROUND AND JOE SNATCHED UP HIS FALLEN GUN, A YELL OF DEFIANCE ON HIS LIPS.

COME ON,
YOU RATS! COME
AND GET IT!

STEADY, JOE!
GET DOWN
INTO COVER.

JOE DROPPED BACK INTO COVER, THE BULLETS FROM THE STEN LASHING THE ENEMY RANKS.

AMMUNITION WAS RUNNING LOW, THEY COULD NOT HOLD OFF THE JAPANESE FOR MUCH LONGER.

WISH TO HECK THEY'D BUCK
UP WITH THAT RADIO!
THIS IS GETTING
HOTTER THAN WE
CAN HANDLE!



AT THAT INSTANT MAC BURST OUT OF THE RADIO TENT...

EVERYTHING'S OKAY, SKIPPER! WE GOT THROUGH TO BASE!

NICE WORK! NOW — WE'VE GOT TO GET OUT OF HERE — FAST!

YOU'RE TELLING ME!



THE ENEMY WERE CLOSING IN — WITHDRAWAL WAS GOING TO BE DIFFICULT. DON LOOKED KEENLY ABOUT HIM...

JOE, THINGS ARE HOT — LET'S WARM IT UP STILL MORE. SEE THAT TANKER...

I'M RIGHT WITH YOU, SKIPPER!



WITH BULLETS SLASHING THE TREES AND GROUND AROUND THEM, THE TWO MEN RACED FORWARD. BEHIND THEM, LIEUTENANT LACEY AND THE REST PINNED THE JAPS DOWN WITH A WITHERING HAIL OF LEAD.



DON SNATCHED A LENGTH OF FUEL PIPE FROM THE TANKER WHILE JOE LEAPED TO THE VALVES. IN A MOMENT A STREAM OF PETROL WAS GUSHING ON TO THE NEARBY VEGETATION...



THEN THEY TURNED AND RACED FOR THE GAP IN THE WIRE.



RIGHT!
ANYBODY GOT
A GRENADE?

HERE!
THROUGH
HERE!

AS THE REST OF THE MEN TURNED TOWARDS THE JUNGLE, DON LOBBED A GRENADE INTO THE PETROL-SOAKED AREA. THERE WAS AN EYE-SEARING FLASH, A ROAR, AND BEFORE THE STARTLED JAPS COULD RECOVER THEIR SENSE, FLAMES WERE REACHING UP THE CAMOUFLAGE NETTING.



THE RESULT WAS EVEN MORE EFFECTIVE THAN DON COULD HAVE HOPED, FOR THE FOLIAGE STREWN OVER THE NETTING WAS TINDER DRY...



THE STACCATO RATTLE OF CANNON FIRE ADDED TO THE DIN AS A ZERO CAUGHT FIRE AND THE AMMUNITION IN ITS GUNS BEGAN TO EXPLODE.



ELATED, THE BRITISH PARTY HEADED AWAY FROM THAT SCENE OF DESTRUCTION. THEY HAD COVERED BARELY A QUARTER OF A MILE, HOWEVER, WHEN DON GAVE A CRY OF WARNING...

LOOK OUT!
JAPS!



IT WAS A PATROL OF THE ENEMY HASTENING BACK TO THE AIRSTRIP WHICH THEY HAD SEEN BURNING. MOST OF THEM NEVER KNEW WHAT HIT THEM...

NOW!
LET 'EM HAVE
IT!



NO QUARTER WAS ASKED OR GIVEN — IT WAS FIGHT OR DIE!

THAT'S
THE LOT,
SIR!

WELL DONE,
MEN!



THEY HAD HARDLY RESUMED THEIR TREK TO SAFETY WHEN THE DISTANT MURMUR OF AIRCRAFT ENGINES SWELLED TO A ROAR. MAC PRICKED UP HIS EARS...

LISTEN, SIR!
DAKOTAS — OR I'M
A DUTCHMAN!



DAKOTAS THERE WERE! SIX OF THEM, COMING IN OVER THE JAP AIRFIELD, GUIDED BY THE STILL SMOULDERING FIRE.

PARATROOPS,
BY THUNDER!

LET'S
GET BACK
THERE!

EAGERLY, THEY RETRACED THEIR
STEPS TO ARRIVE IN TIME TO SEE
THE SECOND WAVE OF PARATROOPERS
DROPPING TO THE GROUND.

YIPPEE!
THAT'S THE STUFF
TO GIVE 'EM, THE LITTLE
PERISHERS!



BUT JOE'S FACE WORE A PUZZLED EXPRESSION AS HE AND DON JOINED THE OFFICER IN CHARGE.

WHY THE HECK DIDN'T THE R.A.F. SEND OUT A SQUADRON OF BOMBERS TO BLOW THIS PLACE SKY-HIGH?

AND DESTROY A PERFECTLY GOOD AIRSTRIP? WE'D ONLY HAVE TO REBUILD THE PLACE FOR OUR OWN USE! THIS WAY WE'VE GOT IT INTACT ... WITH ONLY A FEW MINOR REPAIRS NEEDED.

FOR THE REST OF THAT MORNING EVERYONE TURNED TO, HELPING TO CLEAR THE RUNWAY. IN THE EVENING, THE FIRST DAKOTAS FLEW IN...

TRANSPORT COMMAND HAS ITS USES, JOE... AND IT'S EXCITEMENT, TOO!

YOU KNOW, SKIPPER, THESE LAST FEW HOURS HAVE TAUGHT ME A THING OR TWO. I NEVER LOOKED AT IT FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE BLOKES ON THE GROUND BEFORE.

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